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ABSTRACT

This study examined the conversation patterns of 26 Hawaiian kindergarten children in order to determine whether children with a Hawaiian Creole (HC) preference or a Standard English (SE) preference speak to each other. The normal interactions of the children (14 boys and 12 girls) were monitored during the learning center sessions of the kindergarten class, when the children over a period of time had random access to each other. Data on each child included to whom he talked and how often, and how often utterances were addressed to the group or self. This data was subsequently compared to individual scores on the Standard English Repetition Test (SERT) and to the results of a sociometric study done on the same children. Results indicated that conversation patterns were determined by proximity, not by language code preference. Some sex differences in conversation patterns were also observed. (CM)

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Abstract

Children's conversations with each other, even during the school day constitute a major source of linguistic influence. Do children with a Hawaiian-Creole (HC) preference, or a Standard English (SE) preference, speak to each other? Are there two separate language communities present in the classroom or a homogeneous one? This study, conducted in learning-centers where children across time have random access to one another, concluded that who-speaks-to-whom is determined by proximity, not by language-code preference. The language influence system, then, is homogeneous, not separated by code preference.

Technical Report #16

Sources of Linguistic Influence: Peers at Learning Centers

Violet Mays

This study proposed to answer the question: Who talks to whom during the kindergarten children's learning-center period? Related issues involved the awareness of and reaction by children of this age to different codes used by peers and the classroom potential for peer influence in the acquisition of Standard English (SE).

The normal interactions of the children were monitored during the learning-center sessions of the kindergarten class. Each child worked at the learning-center of his choice on a given day, except that the sequence of six available tables had to be completed before repeating a given table. The procedures for choosing tables made it unlikely that children chose in order to be near their friends; over a long period of time, the distribution of children by tables was close to random. Thus, the learning-center tables offered a setting for studying relative frequencies of conversations, when (over time) opportunities occurred for a great many conversations.

Twenty-six children were each observed at their learning-centers. The subject's name and the names of the other children at the table were recorded. Each time the subject addressed an utterance to a child, that child's name was written down. If the target seemed to be the group or self, X was recorded. Only the utterances of the subject (S) were counted during observation. An utterance was defined as a word, phrase, sentence, string of sentences, or repetitions of a word said without pause, ending when there is a pause, after which would begin another utterance. No record was kept of the content.

Each child was observed for four two-minute periods, each observation made at a separate learning-center session. The subject sat with four different groups of children at each session--a group being at least two other children present at the table. Data was taken only when these conditions were met. The two observers attained a reliability of 83% on utterances to individuals and 87% on X utterances.

After obtaining the data on each child, to whom he talked and how many times, as well as how many X utterances he made, we compared the results to the scores each child had on the Standard English Repetition Test (SERT) and to the results of the sociometric study done on the same children.

The children were grouped as high, medium, and low SE speakers. Taking the mean number of utterances by a high, medium, or low SE child to other high, medium, or low SE children, the difference between the observed frequencies and the expected frequencies was found to be negligible.

Utterances by SE Groups to SE Targets

		Targets		
		High	Medium	Low
Speakers	High	3 (2.6)	5 (5.06)	3 (3.14)
	Medium	2.8 (2.95)	6 (5.71)	3.6 (3.54)
	Low	1.7 (1.9)	3.5 (2.08)	2.9 (2.4)

(Expected Frequencies in Parentheses)

The children were not using language code to determine whom they would address. In other words, our high SE and low SE children do talk to one another as frequently as they do within their own groups.

A comparison between the mean number of utterances by the high SE speakers

and the low SE speakers was made. The difference was not found to be significant ($t = .128$, $df = 16$, two-tailed $p < .05$). Medium SE speakers had about the same mean number of utterances as the low group, therefore not significantly different from the high group.

Sex seemed to make some difference for who talks more, and for who talks to whom. Nine of fourteen high verbalizers, (seventeen or more utterances) were boys, and seven of twelve low verbalizers (sixteen or less utterances) were girls.

There were fourteen boys and twelve girls in the kindergarten class. Twelve out of fourteen boys talked to more boys than girls; two talked to an even number of boys and girls. Six of the twelve girls talked to more girls; three talked to more boys; and three talked to an even number of boys and girls.

The proportion of the number of times an individual was addressed/the number of times available at a center was compared with the results of the sociometric study; there was no significant relationship between popularity and being addressed.

Summary

The children talk to each other often. The conversations occur among whichever children happen to be near, except that boys talk more frequently and same-sex conversations are more likely than cross-sex ones. The only pattern in the language community seems to be determined by sex; SE vs. HC abilities do not influence the choice of who speaks to whom, and even social popularity does not significantly affect frequency of utterances to peers.

With respect to the SE vs. HC issue, then, the classroom is a single community, with speech directed toward any nearby child.